

Caroline Mathilde: Steve Fuger

Caroline Mathilde was more than just a narrowboat. For seven years she was my home, my refuge, my happy place. She gifted me a glow of excitement and accompanied me as I clambered from the wreckage of an unfortunate marriage. She restored my confidence, confirmed my independence and allowed me to float free.

She was my favoured accommodation option, per: newly singled and unable to secure a mortgage, the alternative was to haemorrhage rent on a claustrophobic flatlet. My limited funds, however, were sufficient to order a new all-steel narrowboat shell.

Caroline Mathilde was seven feet wide and fifty long, with a more liveable cruiser stern than a traditionally shaped hull offered. I lined and fitted her out myself, her layout exactly as I wanted and not “because that’s the way it’s always done”.

I incorporated her into my work and used her, unashamedly,

until the day that unexpected- and most unlikely of phenomena, a decent man, hove into view.

Checking our diaries later, we found that, for two years, we’d crossed canals and moorings, without actually meeting.

“I haven’t decided where to go this winter,” he said.

“I’m going south. Why don’t you come too?” Two days later he caught me up.

In time, we found that maintaining two live-aboard boats, effectively two homes, was impractical, and floated the idea of a butty, an engineless workboat, and running a pair. His boat had a traditional stern and more appropriate to pair with a butty, so Caroline Mathilde was up for sale.

And I realized what she meant to me.

In the days before I handed her over to her new owner, I would shut myself away inside her. Go over everything I’d built and made, what it was all about, just how much she’d supported me, and that lump in my throat became welling tears and the welling tears wracking sobs. I felt I was abandoning her when she had been so generous.

The morning came and with it her new owner. Her engine fired up, her mooring ropes freed and she hesitantly pulled out into the canal, unsteady under an unfamiliar hand at her “elum”. I stood and watched as at length she manoeuvred the bend and disappeared from sight. And still I stood, long, watching the empty canal where she had been. My life had just changed. Forever. Goodbye Caroline Mathilde, thank you, for everything, and farewell.